

XXXVII.—*Remarks on certain Points in Ornithological Nomenclature.* By HENRY SEEBOHM, F.Z.S.

THE attempt which Strickland made to introduce order into the chaos of zoological nomenclature, by constructing a code of laws to save it from the hopeless confusion into which it was drifting, deserves the highest praise. Though these rules were carefully amended by a zoological committee, and passed by the parliament of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, no one who is familiar with the imperfections of statute-law will be surprised to learn that, like all other codes, the Stricklandian rules proved inadequate to meet the multiplicity of cases with which they had to deal. The difficulty was met by allowing a liberal interpretation of the rules when necessary, or even by tacitly ignoring them where a blind adherence to the letter of the law would have increased the confusion it was constructed to avoid. Around the Stricklandian statute law there has thus arisen an uncodified ornithological "judges' law," founded upon the practice of the best ornithologists, which has, until recently, secured the important objects at which Strickland aimed.

But, unfortunately, during the last few years three ornithological works have put in an appearance, which threaten to undo much of the good which Strickland's efforts have accomplished. Ornithological nomenclature is once more disturbed by frivolous changes, and is rapidly drifting from the position of exact scientific accuracy to that of mere popular indefiniteness. These three works, Newton's 'Birds of Britain,' Dresser's 'Birds of Europe,' and Sharpe's 'Catalogue of the Birds of the British Museum,' so far as each has proceeded, have gradually undermined the principles which Strickland endeavoured to embody in his code; so that now a state of confusion has arisen in ornithological nomenclature little, if at all, better than the pre-Stricklandian chaos. Newton, in his edition of Yarrell's 'British Birds,' has apparently ignored the practice of Strickland and other eminent ornithologists, and too frequently, in opposition to

the spirit of the law, has endeavoured to carry out the British-Association rules to the "bitter end," and, as he himself admits, "regardless of consequences"! In an obscure writer such a reckless course would have been of no consequence, but pursued by Professor Newton, who is admitted by the majority of British ornithologists to be the greatest authority on ornithological literature, its effects have been truly disastrous. Even in the small instalment of Newton's work which has been hitherto published, there has been a great slaughter of the innocents. It seems very hard to have to give up *Bubo maximus*, *Strix brachyotus*, *Phylloscopus rufus*, *Sylvia cinerea*, *Sylvia hortensis*, and many other names familiar as household words to us from our childhood. Dresser, in his 'Birds of Europe,' has, however, "outheroded Herod." Wherever Newton has made a change, Dresser has blindly followed him; and in too many instances, instead of being satisfied to carry out certain of the British-Association rules to the uttermost, he has gone even further still, and given the doubtful name the benefit of the doubt, apparently for no other reason than because of its novelty. To make confusion more confounded, Sharpe, in his 'Catalogue of Birds,' after following Newton's unfortunate lead through two volumes, then turned suddenly round, and in his third volume openly violated the rules, choosing for the purpose, amongst others, an instance especially selected by Strickland for disapproval. I may be doing Sharpe an injustice in charging him with inconsistency. Probably he came to the conclusion that Newton, Dresser, and he had given the British-Association code rope enough, and that it had hanged itself before his third volume was published.

For a year or two I have urged upon several of my ornithological friends the importance of taking action on this disgraceful state of our favourite science, a position of affairs which has excited the derision of some of our continental associates, but hitherto in vain. Now that a decision is forced upon me, I have come to the conclusion that the only course open to a conscientious ornithologist, is to attempt to codify the existing ornithological "judges' law;" in fact, to alter

the rules to suit the cases which have been left unprovided for in the Stricklandian code, so as to carry out, as far as possible, the great objects which that excellent reformer aimed at.

The principal objects of a code of nomenclature ought to be the following :—

1. To ensure that every genus and every species of bird shall have a definite name, about which there can be *no manner of doubt* as to the exact genus or species intended to be discriminated by such name.

2. To make as little change as possible in the names of birds, and to effect the adoption of the same name for the same bird by as many ornithologists as possible.

3. To ensure the adoption of the name given by the writer who first clearly defined the genus or species to which it belongs, as far as practicable.

The revolutionary changes introduced by Messrs. Newton, Sharpe, and Dresser, render a codification of ornithological judges' law necessary to reestablish the principles of the Stricklandian code. Perhaps the simplest way to approach this subject will be to select a few of the most flagrant offences of which the above-named writers have been guilty, to point out where these are in violation of the existing code, and, in the cases in which the letter of the law is obeyed in violation of its spirit, to draft out a rider to the present law to meet such case.

Before proceeding to these cases I should like to say a few words upon the binomial system of nomenclature. Upon this question ornithologists are divided into two camps. We have the Utopian party, who assert that ornithological nomenclature must be strictly binomial, consisting of a specific and generic name only, and the practical party, who assert that to these two names must be added the authority for the specific name. No doubt, in Utopia, where the same name is never given to two species of birds, where ornithological names are never misapplied, and where the memories of ornithologists are never at fault, such an addition is unnecessary. Among blundering mortals, like ourselves (and I know of no ornithologist who does not blunder, the blunders of ornitho-

logists being pretty much in the direct ratio of the amount of work they do), it seems to me impossible that a name can have absolute definiteness without a reference to the person who defined it. The name quoted, with the appendix, does not become in any sense trinomial. It remains strictly binomial. The authority is no part of the name, any more than the reference to its origin, but is only quoted to give definition to it, to ensure the greatest possible scientific precision, and as a concession to the "humanity" of ornithologists, who might otherwise "err" as to the species of bird first described under the name.

Now let us take our "cases."

*Saxicola stapazina*, Dresser, Birds of Eur. pt. xxv.

*Sterna hirundo*, Dresser, Birds of Eur. pt. xii.

When Dresser transferred the name of the Black-throated Chat to the Eared Chat, and that of the Common Tern to the Arctic Tern, he placed future ornithologists upon the horns of a dilemma. Thenceforth the binomial term of *Saxicola stapazina* ceased to be a scientific term; and to give it the necessary precision to enable it to become scientific, either the circuitous term *Saxicola stapazina*, Linn., fide Dresser, or the equally objectionable term *Saxicola stapazina*, Linn. ncc Temm. &c., must be used. Ornithologists will not easily forgive a writer who obliges them to reject a long familiar name. I conceive that we have no alternative but to reject these names altogether. To meet these cases I propose the following rider to Rule 12 of the Stricklandian code:—

"The object of all rules of scientific nomenclature being to attain absolute precision, it is obvious that a name which has been extensively applied to one species ought not, under any circumstances, to be transferred to any other species in the same genus. Where any reasonable doubt attaches to the correctness of any identification, the species in possession of the name should have the benefit of the doubt, in order to avoid change. Where no doubt whatever exists that a name ordinarily attributed to one, properly belongs to another species of the

same genus, it must be discarded altogether, but under no possible circumstance should it be transferred to another species in the same genus—a practice which cannot be too strongly condemned, as entirely destroying the scientific character of ornithological nomenclature.”

*Phylloscopus collibyta*, Newton's ed. Yarr. Brit. B. i. p. 437 ; Dresser, Birds of Eur. pt. lxxiv.

It seems to me a matter of profound regret that an attempt should have been made to ignore the name of *Phylloscopus rufus* for the Chiffchaff. It is impossible to identify the *Curruca rufa* of Brisson or “la petite Fauvette rousse” of Buffon with any known bird. Daubenton's plate of “la Fauvette rousse” is equally unintelligible, though Newton and Dresser accept it as a clear definition of the Whitethroat, for which they consequently claim the name of *Motacilla rufa* of Boddaert. If the two birds had remained in the same genus it would undoubtedly have been necessary to discard the name altogether. Had Boddaert's name been otherwise unobjectionable, it must have been rejected on the ground that *Sylvia rufa* would perpetually be confounded with the Chiffchaff. On the other hand, *Phylloscopus rufus* can never be confounded with the Whitethroat.

I therefore propose to ignore altogether the specific term *rufus* until it is found attached to a bird which is clearly defined, and to call the Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus rufus* (Bechst.), since Bechstein was undoubtedly the first ornithologist who clearly defined the species. To cover cases of this kind I propose to add a clause to Rule 12, to enact that names which cannot be identified must be considered as not existing ; otherwise we shall have some ultra-conscientious ornithologist giving a new name to Blyth's Reed Warbler on the ground that it is not the *Motacilla dumetorum* of Linnæus, though no one can tell to which species of the genus *Acrocephalus* this name of Linnæus was intended to apply. The existence of a phantom *Motacilla rufa* of Boddaert, and of an equally unsubstantial *Motacilla rufa* of Gmelin and Latham, ought not, in my opinion, to bar the use of *Sylvia*



*rufa* by Bechstein for a bird which that excellent field-naturalist describes so accurately that no one can doubt for a moment that he is describing the Chiffchaff. I therefore propose the following rider to Rule 12 :—

“Names accompanied by descriptions so imperfect as to be incapable of identification with any known species, must be consigned to the oblivion of prelinneæan names, so that their existence shall be no bar to the adoption of the same name when given by a later writer.”

This rule will also apply to and provide for the following case :—

*Acrocephalus aquaticus*, Newton's ed. Yarr. Brit. B. i. p. 380; Dresser, Birds of Eur. pt. li.

The Aquatic Warbler has by no means a clear title to its name. Scopoli's bird may have been either a Sedge-Warbler or an Aquatic Warbler; but his description is inconsistent with either of them. Neither Gmelin nor Latham appear to have known the bird, but to have simply copied Scopoli. Bechstein, Meyer and Wolf, and Naumann were well acquainted with the species, but identified it, probably incorrectly, with the *Motacilla salicaria* of Linnæus, a name which has been transferred from one species to another until it has long ago ceased to have any definite meaning or any scientific value. Temminck was the first writer to use the name *aquatica* for a clearly defined species; and since his name has been in general use, and has not been extensively, if at all, applied to any other species, we are, in my opinion, justified in calling the Aquatic Warbler *Acrocephalus aquaticus* (Temm.), consigning the *Motacilla aquatica* of Gmelin and the *Sylvia aquatica* of Latham to the Lethe of prelinneæan oblivion.

*Turdus dubius*, Dresser, Birds of Eur. pt. lviii.

The Thrush hitherto known as *Turdus fuscatus* of Pallas is christened *Turdus dubius* by Dresser, because that writer has “satisfied himself” that Bechstein's description of a Thrush which was sent to him from Coburg refers to an immature example of Pallas's bird. After carefully reading over the de-

scription, I can only come to the conclusion that Bechstein's bird is a very *doubtful* one, but that, having regard to the absence of any allusion to the chestnut on the wing-coverts, and the positive statement that the under wing-coverts were bright orange, the probabilities are that it was a Song-Thrush in first plumage, which, in consequence of being kept in a cage, retained much of the immature plumage after the first moult. Whether this was the case or not ; whether it was an abnormal variety of *Turdus musicus*, or of some other Thrush, I cannot say ; but it seems to me a gross violation both of the spirit and of the letter of the Stricklandian code to accept this as a clear definition of the bird hitherto known as *Turdus fuscatus*, and to attempt to supersede that name by *Turdus dubius*.

*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*, Newton, Ed. Yarr. B. i. p. 364 ; Dresser, Birds of Eur. pt. lxi.

When Meyer transferred the Great Sedge-Warbler to the genus *Acrocephalus* from the genus *Turdus*, in which it was placed by Linnæus, and in which it was retained by Gmelin, Bechstein, Meyer and Wolf (in their joint work), Temminck, in his edition then published, and later by Vieillot, he found that the specific name was already occupied by the Reed-Warbler. His scientific instincts prevented him from creating hopeless confusion by transferring the name of the Reed-Warbler to the Great Sedge-Warbler, and he very judiciously gave to the latter bird a specific name of his own, which, among continental ornithologists, it has retained ever since.

Gray appears to have been the first ornithologist to introduce confusion by applying the name of *arundinacea* to both species ; but he got over the consequent difficulty by putting them into different genera. Newton further complicated matters by reuniting the genera, and retaining the name for the larger species. This he was entitled to do under the Stricklandian code, which makes no provision for cases of this kind. His unfortunate, though legal, decision has been indorsed by Harting, Blanford, Gurney, Dresser, and others, until the name has ceased to have a definite meaning, and must be rejected altogether, all Stricklandian rules or British-

Association codes notwithstanding, unless the study of ornithology is to be allowed to drift into a popular amusement, in which scientific accuracy is of minor importance.

The name *arundinaceus* having ceased to be a scientific term in the genus *Acrocephalus*, the strict letter of the law requires us to adopt that of *junco* of Pallas. This appears to me to be a case in which ornithological law may fairly be overridden by ornithological equity. Pallas had no right to substitute the prelinneæan name of *junco* for the Linnæan name of *arundinaceus*, since he quotes the latter as a synonym, and retains the species in the genus *Turdus*. I submit therefore that the Great Sedge-Warbler ought to be known by its time-honoured name of *Acrocephalus turdoides* (Meyer); and I propose to justify the proceeding by adding the following rider to Rule 12 :—

“Names which have been in general use for many years, and which have been clearly defined, ought not to be superseded by the discovery of earlier names, comparatively unknown, except in cases where the newly discovered name accompanies the earliest clear definition of the species.”

*Graculus graculus*, Sharpe, Cat. of Birds, p. 146.

*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*, Sharpe, Cat. of Birds, iii. p. 148.

*Corone corone*, Sharpe, Cat. of Birds, iii. p. 36.

*Pica pica*, Sharpe, Cat. of Birds, iii. p. 62.

It is a thousand pities that ornithologists did not retain the excellent practice commenced by Brisson of giving to the type of each genus the same specific and generic name. To revert to the practice now would, I fear, involve too much change in our nomenclature, though it would undoubtedly give to it a system and simplicity which it does not at present possess. But be this as it may, it is obviously absurd to apply the system in a few isolated cases. In the original Stricklandian code it was provided that wherever a specific name was elevated to generic rank, a new specific name must be found. At the Meeting of the British Association in 1865, this rule was reversed, and it was enacted that the specific name so pro-



moted must be reduced to the ranks, and a new generic name must be found. This alteration in the rule still remains unrescinded. It was carried by a number of eminent ornithologists; but I cannot learn that any one of them has had the courage of his opinions; and to this day it remains a dead letter, to the standing disgrace of ornithological science. I therefore venture to propose the following compromise:—

“Specific names that have been elevated to generic rank prior to the year 1817 shall be allowed to stand; but where such changes have been made subsequent to that date, the specific name shall be restored and another generic name found.”

*Hypolais languida*, Dresser, Birds of Eur. pt.

This name stands as *Hypolais languida* of Hemprich and Ehrenberg, in direct violation of the Stricklandian code, but in accordance with the most approved ornithological judges' law. In Ehrenberg's description no character whatever is given by which the species may be distinguished from its near allies. It was rejected for want of a clear definition until Blanford and Dresser examined the type in the Berlin Museum. Cases of this kind are numerous; and to provide for them I propose the following rider to Rule 12:—

“Slight errors in a description may be condoned, or omissions supplemented by reference to the type specimen, if such exist in any public museum. No type specimen shall, however, be allowed to give value to a name where no description whatever has been published.”

There are doubtless some other points which I have overlooked. Perfection in ornithological, as well as in civil law, can only be attained by slow degrees. Other cases, which neither Strickland's code nor any codification of judges' law have contemplated, will continually arise and have to be provided for. My object is not to strive after an impossible perfection. Had it been so I should have delayed my paper for some years. It seems to me that the most important thing to be done is, without delay, to protest, in the name of scientific accuracy and ornithological equity, against the

revolutionary attempts of Messrs. Newton, Sharpe, and Dresser to corrupt the ornithological morality of the present age.

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XXXVIII.—*On a Collection of Birds from the Solomon Islands and New Hebrides.* By H. B. TRISTRAM, F.R.S.

(Plates XI., XII.)

I HAVE had placed in my hands for determination, by the kindness of Vice-Admiral Sir Geo. H. Richards, K.C.B., a small but very interesting collection of birds made by his son, Lieut. Richards, R.N., at Makira Harbour, San Cristoval, Solomon Islands, between the 22nd August and 3rd October in last year, consisting of thirty-three species. Of these no less than twelve are, so far as I can ascertain, as yet undescribed, while several of the others are of extreme rarity in collections, some of them being not, as yet, known to exist in any museum in this country. The fact of the whole collection having been made in a limited area shows how much yet remains to be done before the avifauna of this portion of the Pacific can be looked upon as exhausted. The exceptional beauty of many of the new species, such as the *Ceyx*, *Charmosyna*, and *Ptilopus*, renders their absence from previous collections from the Solomon Islands the more remarkable. Either previous explorers have very cursorily skimmed the island fauna, or the species must be extremely local.

1. *ASTUR* (*UROSPIZA*), sp.?

An immature bird in first year's plumage. Very like the young of *A. approximans*, but much smaller. It agrees exactly in measurements with an adult specimen of *A. torquatus* in my collection from the New Hebrides, and may probably prove to be the young of that species.

The specimen is a male. Iris bright yellow; feet orange.

2. *HALIASTUR GIRRENERA* (Vieill.).

Two specimens, adult.